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# Watson's Art Journal,

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[From the *Atlantic Monthly*.]

### THE OLD MASTERS IN THE LOUVRE, AND MODERN ART.

Each generation has to cultivate anew an appreciation of the great works of the past. It is not enough that the masters of art and of life were crowned in their time; it is not enough that they won the best appreciation of the best spirits of the last century—not enough that the critics, the intellectual testers, the careful assayers for the last generation, found them good. The living public of the present hour, looking with fresh eyes, curiously questions the great men, and demands a re-examination of the grounds of their splendid reputation.

Our fathers read Byron, and called him great; we read him, and call him boyish, moody, energetic, and but for the eloquence of his discontent would hardly read the poetry of a mind without tenderness, subtlety, or sweetness. In like manner we have fallen heirs to the critical estimates of the old masters; and all the general terms of

art-appreciation have been employed to express the transcendent worth of their works. But the American mind is so remote from the habitual state of feeling and being that gave birth to the works of the old masters, that with many any enthusiasm regarding their merits is either forced and hypocritical, or the result of total ignorance of the meaning and value of art. With men who hold a true and vital relation to art, admiration, not to say love, of the old masters is not a sudden and spontaneous thing. Sir Joshua Reynolds himself, anything but dormant in his appreciation of art, confessed to a feeling of disappointment on first entering the Vatican.

My reason for writing of a subject that has engaged the first literary and artistic talent of every age since the revival of art is that it is not enough for our public that the old masters have been well appreciated by great writers and acute critics. Ruskin has proved that the question of the value of the great works of the dead masters is not closed; he has even taught us that the question itself may be changed in its form. The truth is that the old masters judged by Continental critics according to the precedents established by the old masters themselves, and the old masters judged from the standpoint of a modern man in America, with nothing but nature and the present examples of great modern art, lead to very different conclusions, and evolve very antagonistic thoughts.

A change has come over the world of art; it is no more the thing it was to the great Venetian and Florentine masters,—it is no more the thing it was to the Greeks. The modern world is not artistic, but scientific; it cares more for knowledge, and the reasons of things, than for enjoyment and perception. But without going into tedious examination of the causes of this change before we know well the thing itself, I propose you shall go with me to the Square Gallery of the Louvre, rich in characteristic and remarkable works of the greatest men of the greatest epoch of Italian and Flemish art. If you are a lover of art, I think you will go to the Louvre the first day you arrive in Paris. If you are a nervous enthusiast, you will be conscious of great mental excitement at the mere thought that, after years of waiting and dreaming, at last, and in a few minutes, you shall stand before the forms and colors that have made the world sound with the great names of Titian, Leonardo da Vinci, Paul Veronese, Rembrandt, Raphael, and Tintoretto. You will hurry

across the Seine, you will pass the Swiss guard with his amazing legs and gold braid, you will go up the broad steps of the palace, and in a few minutes stand breathless before Gericault's terrible picture of "The Wreck," so full of marvellous energy and dramatic force,—a picture expressive of the terror of death, and the tenacity of hope in the midst of despair,—in a word, the terrible picture of a suicide; for poor, unhappy, forlorn Gericault at last succumbed to the horrible fascination of his idea of death.

While you take breath before Gericault's great canvas, let me tell you that you stand before the last of the old and the beginning of the new in art. But let us move on.

We are now in the Salon of Apollo,—perhaps the most splendid interior in Paris. Stop one moment; you are under Delacroix's famous picture of Apollo slaying the Python.

Is it not a superb mass of color? Apollo himself seems bursting in light over your head; and the Python twists his horrid length, in mortal agony, along the heaving sea. Yes, you are under Delacroix's picture—his great picture! What color! What richness of effect! What energy! What largeness and affluence of conception! You are under the *plafond* of Delacroix,—the greatest of modern painters,—the man great enough in his work and style as a painter to rank with the first of the old masters; noble and sad and profound enough in his subject to belong to the modern epoch,—the epoch of the revolt, the twilight of the old, the dawn of the new,—the time just before science and travel had exacted a new development,—before both had given art a new direction, made it less imperial, made it commonplace and instructive instead of original and moving.

But pass on; Delacroix is only the last effort of the genius of Painting, as that genius was known in the day of its glory. To know what that genius meant, and what was its glory, separated from all modern elements, we must enter the Square Gallery of the Louvre.

Before we look at the great examples of painting, I wish you to examine what I hold to be the first example of *expression* in art, and I may say the most remarkable picture in the world. I mean Leonardo da Vinci's strange, haunting face of Mona Lisa, the Florentine wife. This head is an exceptional thing; it is without its counterpart from any hand but that of Da Vinci's. But I am convinced that it is of that order of excellence, and of a strange charm, which are not perceived by most men. It is both subtle and intense; and a limited, frank, straightforward mind, a mind purely prosaic and objective in its habits of thought and in its perceptions, would simply wonder with a child's wonder or a man's chagrin that any one could see anything to admire, much less frequently reflect upon, in the mere portrait study of Mona Lisa. Yet one famous English critic called it the "mighty portrait of Leonardo;" and the cleverest, if not the ablest, of living French critics, twelve years ago, wrote the most enthusiastic words, which to-day in his grave maturity he reprints, and declares that they render faithfully his impression.

The color has evidently flown from Leonardo's picture. The lips are colorless; the face, a pale olive, also colorless; and the background is quite worthless, though not obtrusive. The face is an exquisite piece of modelling and manipulation. The forehead

is very high and broad; the eyes are of a soft brown, penetrating without being bright or sharp; the nose is thin and delicate; the mouth very small, and with a smile, ironical and sweet, yet lingering about it. The face is oval, the hair brown, the drapery a dull olive. One hand, an exquisite piece of drawing and painting, highly finished, perfectly beautiful in form, and expressive of repose of nature, rests over the other.

Leonardo was a painter of hidden things. He reached the inner life. Purely objective, frank, open minds, and simple out-of-door natures, like Troyon's, the animal-painter, for example, or with the addition of princely traits, as we find in Veronese, rarely understand, much less appreciate, the work and character of such a man as Leonardo. You will best understand what *La Mona Lisa del Giocondo* is by its effect upon a clear, brilliant spirit, like Théophile Gautier.

"*La Joconde!* sphinx of beauty, who smiles so mysteriously in the frame of Leonardo da Vinci, and seems to propose to the admiration of ages an enigma by them not yet solved, an invincible attraction brings every one back to thee! Who has not remained long hours before that head, bathed in twilight half-tints, enveloped in transparent gauze, and whose features, melodiously drowned in a violet vapor, appear like the creation of a dream, through the floating blackness of sleep! From what planet is fallen in the midst of an azure landscape that strange being, with her glance which promises unknown voluptuousness, and her expression divinely ironical? Leonardo gives to his faces such an imprint of superiority that one feels disturbed in their presence. The lids of her profound eyes hide secrets interdicted to the profane; and the curve of her mocking lips suit the gods, who know everything and gently despise human vulgarities. What unquieting fixedness, and what superhuman sardonic meaning in those sombre pupils, in those lips undulating like the bow of love after it has hurled the arrow. Should you not say that the Joconde is the Isis of a cryptic religion, who, believing herself alone, half opens the folds of her veil, even if the imprudent one who surprises her become insane and die for it? Never has the feminine ideal been invested with forms more deliciously seductive. Believe that, if Don Juan had met Mona Lisa, he would have spared himself the trouble of writing down the names of three thousand women; he would have found but one; and the wings of his desire would have refused to carry him further. They would have drooped and become unfeathered before the black sun of these eyes. We have seen her very often, that adorable Joconde, but our declaration of love does not appear to us too burning. She is ever there, smiling with a mocking voluptuousness upon her numberless lovers. Upon her brow reposes that serenity of a woman sure of being eternally beautiful, and who feels herself superior to the ideal of all poets and of all artists."

It is well that we have two orders of men of genius in the world. And it is important that we understand the two great types. I take Paul Veronese as the type of the frank, open, princely mind. His is a genius that looks at nature and life to simplify both,—to use them as a master. I take Leonardo as a subtle and profound mind; a nature brooding and involved. He readily sees that the bold, happy generalizer misses a great deal; that he is devoid of a

sense of the mystery of things, and does not know the greatness of little things. The immediate honor is won by such men as Veronese, who are nearer to the public; the lasting honors are won by such men as Leonardo. He paints a single head, he devotes four years to it; that one head is a masterpiece for all time, and incites more thought than the splendid canvas of Veronese, gorgeous with color, natural, simple, vigorous.

But, for myself, I go from the blare of trumpets, and the noise of festivals, and the pomp of color of Veronese's "*Marriage at Cans*," to the profound, the silent, subtle head of *Mona Lisa*, the Florentine wife, on the opposite wall. What a personality is placed before us! Not strictly speaking what you would call a beautiful woman, yet a woman fascinating, charming—all that Gautier tries to tell with a language meant to seduce the mind.

There is something tragic in Leonardo's head of *Mona Lisa*—something that makes the sweetness a terrible sweetness. It is a face to mask the enigma of the Sphinx. Why is it so sad, so haunting? Why does it exercise such an undying fascination? The mouth is positively smiling, and sweet as childhood in expression. Why then is it so sad, so tragic?—hidden tragedy I should say. I call it the saddest, sweetest, most living, most feminine face—the face most intense and expressive of a soul of anything that I have ever looked upon. It is the work of one of the greatest and most variously gifted of the splendid men of the sixteenth century, and I know of nothing comparable to it in modern art.

Not far from Leonardo's wonderful portrait study is placed a fine example of Titian—a girl at her toilet, known as "*Titian and his Mistress*." How golden and beautiful! cheerful as sunshine; no hidden mernings; open like the day, and of an ample character. The arms seem, perhaps, too large; but how fine the color! how luminous! and what a healthy type of physical beauty! But you are not to stop before this work to make the acquaintance of Titian. You are to pass on until you reach that most impressive picture, "*The Entombment of Christ*." You must look well at Titian's work—the most perfect artist of the three great men,—Veronese, Leonardo, and Titian. Titian was as great a painter as Veronese, and a more perfect designer, certainly a man of more subtlety and poetry of mind, of more profound feeling. The "*Entombment*" may be taken as the most perfect, as well as the noblest, example of art in the collection of the old masters at the Louvre. The work is grandly composed,—the lines, forms, and colors are large and simple. The color is expressive of the very sentiment of the subject,—the tones solemn and rich, the grouping perfect. The mind of the master was evidently imbued with the poetic and pictorial elements of the subject. His was no mind for festivals and music and pomp, and all the splendid externals of life, as was that of the bright and joyous Paul Veronese, but a reflective and contemplative mind, without the excess of introspectiveness of the great and perhaps morbid Leonardo. Titian's mind was admirably balanced between reflection and action.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

CARLSRUHE.—Schumann's *Genovera* has been successfully revived.